

Mayor Franklin's Parks and Green Spaces Task Force Report

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INTRODUCTION

Mayor Shirley Franklin appointed the Parks and Green Space Task Force in March 2002 to provide advice on improving the City's existing parks and increasing the parks acreage. Clearly, Atlanta is blessed with natural beauty, a lush tree canopy, and rolling terrain. The City has captured some of this natural beauty in a few high quality individual spaces. These isolated spaces are not enough. World-class cities have great parks systems, and we believe Atlanta should have a great park system.

We approached our task first with the recognition that parks represent an essential component of a city's quality of life. We believe parks are necessary outlets for recreation, relaxation, and community spirit. Parks act as our civic gathering places. They promote the social interaction typified by the many well-attended community events at Piedmont Park and Grant Park.

Second, we believe our parks are a powerful tool for defining civic identity. We know Piedmont Park's significant history, that Woodruff Park has a large fountain, and that Centennial Olympic Park has the ring fountain. In fact, the Olympic Ring Fountain at Centennial Olympic Park is frequently used to represent Atlanta. A photograph is used to welcome visitors at Hartsfield Airport.

Third, parks are proven economic development tools. For example, Centennial Olympic Park has spurred the remarkable economic revitalization where adjacent property values have risen from \$2 per-square-foot (pre-park) to \$200 per-square-foot (after-park). The newly announced Georgia Aquarium and the Coke Museum are planned directly adjacent to the north of the park and the comment we hear most is *this is exactly the right place*. Adjacency to Piedmont, Grant and Chastain Parks is in high demand also.

After many interviews and meetings with interested stakeholders, we developed an overall vision of an Atlanta brimming with numerous, convenient, safe and well-maintained parks and green spaces, all connected to the center city and surrounding attractions. In this report we put together a practical roadmap on how Atlanta can achieve this vision over the next 5-10 years. Our ideas and details of this report revolve around four themes:

1. The City must **improve the maintenance and safety** of existing parks. This is the single item mentioned most often by the people we spoke with.
2. The City must **dramatically increase the amount of its park space**. Among comparable cities, we are near the bottom in the amount of park space per person. We believe we can and must do better than this.
3. The City must provide **special recreation parks and special events venues** to reduce the stress on existing parks. Daily use already strains the capacity of Piedmont, Grant, John A. White and Chastain Parks. Events place an unacceptable burden on these parks.
4. The City must **transform the current** Department of Parks, Recreation and Cultural Affairs (referred to as "the Department of Parks") **into a professional and efficient agency** that is managed according to high, measurable standards. We believe the current Department of Parks is dysfunctional (see Appendix A and B).

We organized this report around *Six Big Ideas*, each of which furthers these themes. The biggest idea—transforming the existing Department of Parks into an independent agency characterized by an ethic of professionalism and customer service—the Atlanta Park District—is the most important.

CITY OF ATLANTA PARKS PROFILE

The starting point for any effort to improve Atlanta's parks is to understand where we are today. A comparative review of Atlanta's current parks system as shown in the charts on the following pages highlights a dramatic need for progress in several key areas:

1. Atlanta ranks among the lowest compared to other intermediate-low density cities in park acres per 1,000 residents, 7.5 acres compared to a national average of 19.6 acres in 2000.
2. Atlanta spends far too little in maintaining its parks (\$58 per resident in 2000) compared to those cities recognized as having "best in class" parks systems (Seattle spends \$160 per resident; Minneapolis spends \$144 per resident; Chicago spends \$128 per resident, and Denver spends \$103 per resident). The City also has an imbalance of staff resources with too few maintenance employees and too many parks management employees.
3. Atlanta devotes fewer employees to parks maintenance (0.06 employees per acre of parks in 2000) than "best in class" cities (0.18 for Chicago, 0.15 for Seattle and Denver).
4. We find in other communities there is substantial information regarding public/private partnerships and the revenue generation achieved with these partnerships. We could not find specific information through the Parks Department and we can only surmise these partnerships are not looked upon as a high priority.
5. While there is no objective statistic to support this conclusion, our personal inspection of the Department of Parks operations, as well as our experience as individuals working with the Department of Parks in many capacities, leads us to conclude that the City's maintenance program is inefficient.
6. Atlanta has no public green space larger than one third of a square mile—substantially less than comparable cities.
7. To date parks and the acquisition of park land have not been an ongoing priority in the general public discourse—only the advocacy of a few activists has resulted in increases in park land and the development of parks through public/private partnerships.

Our bottom line is that none of the citizens we spoke with had much to offer in terms of positive feedback on the current structure. The conclusion was the same...we have to change. Our intent is both to challenge Atlanta to achieve greatness—the goals we set forth are extremely ambitious—and also to provide practical advice on how we get there. We believe that with our commitment and perseverance all of the goals outlined in our report are attainable.

Comparison of Parks and Recreation Service Delivery in Comparable Cities¹

<i>Indicator</i>	Chicago	Minneapolis	Miami	Portland	Seattle	Denver	Phila	Atlanta	National Average
2000 City Population	2,896,000	383,000	362,000	529,000	563,000	555,000	1,518,000	416,000	No data
Adjusted Budget in Millions (FY2000) ²	\$371	\$55	\$8.9	\$53	\$90	\$57	\$79	\$24.1	No data
Park Related Expenditures per Resident	\$128	\$144	\$47	\$101	\$160	\$103	\$52	\$58	\$79
Parks and Open Space Per 1000 Residents	4.0	14.9	3.7	24.6	11.0	10.2	7.0	7.6	13.4
Parks and Open Space as % of City Area	8.0%	16.2%	5.8%	15.1%	11.5%	5.7%	12.4%	3.7%	11.0%
Recreation Centers per 20,000 Residents	1.9	2.8	1.4	0.6	0.9	1.2	2.1	1.9	1.1
Number of Permanent Employees	2,162	500	200	371	910	859	550	215³	No data
Average Employees Per Acre	0.18	0.09	0.15	0.03	0.15	0.15	0.05	0.06	No data
Parks & Recreation Board	Board of Commissioners	Parks and Recreations Board	Park and Recreation Citizens Advisory Committee	No; goal to establish board in <i>Parks 2020 Vision Plan</i>	Board of Park Commissioners	Board of Parks & Recreation	Board of Directors	No; approved but never established	NA

¹ Based on data from Parks Atlanta Rescue Coalition (PARC 9-1-1) and ULI and The Trust for Public Land *Inside City Parks*

² Includes both operating and capital expenditures, but excludes stadiums, zoos, and museums

³ 2002 employment number

Given our starting point, we recommend several specific 5-10 year goals to achieve the parks vision outlined earlier.

Those specific goals include:

1. Double the number of park and greenspace acres by 2012.
2. Increase the budget for Parks from \$24.1 million to \$35 million by 2007.
3. Increase the efficiency of the maintenance program as measured by users' comments.
4. Develop one large special recreation area and passive park (dedicated to soccer fields, skateboarding, and inline skating) by 2007.
5. Develop a special events venue to relieve the burden on existing parks by 2007.
6. Make all parks safe by regularly enforcing current laws.

The following chart compares the City of Atlanta's current parks profile with its possible performance on these various criteria after meeting the goals noted above.

City of Atlanta Parks Profile

Estimates	2002	2007 ⁴	2012 ⁵	Comments
City of Atlanta population	419,383	442,746	466,108	
City of Atlanta area in acres	84,352	84,352	84,352	
City of Atlanta pop density level (#people/acre)	4.97	5.25	5.53	
Fulton County population	832,094	928,424	1,024,754	
MSA population	4,285,271	5,199,551	6,113,831	
Municipal park acres in city	3,122	4,500	6,244	
National Park acres in city	4	4	4	MLK, Jr. National Historic Site

⁴ 2007 estimates assume current rate of growth based on 2006 projections from BIS ESRI

⁵ 2010 estimates assume current rate of growth based on 2006 projections from BIS ESRI

Estimates	2002	2007 ⁴	2012 ⁵	Comments
State park acres in city	21	21	21	Centennial Olympic Park
Total park acres in city	3,147	4,525	6,269	
Park acreage per 1,000 residents	7.5	10.2	13.5	13.4 national average ⁶
Park acreage as % of city	3.7%	5.4%	7.4%	11.0% national average ⁷
Department of Parks budget	\$22.7 M	\$35 M	\$45 M	98.2% increase between 2002 and 2012
Parks expenditures per resident	\$54	\$79	\$97	
Number of Department of Parks employees	215	400	940	
Number of management employees	92	40	94	1 manager for every 10 employees
Average employees per acre	0.07	0.09	0.15	0.15 standard of comparable cities
Average park cost per acre (to operate)	\$7,271	\$7,778	\$7,207	City parks only
Average cost per employee	\$106K	\$88K	\$48K	

THE BIG IDEAS AND ACTION STEPS

The rest of this report is dedicated to the big ideas and action steps that we believe are needed to achieve the goals above. We believe that by embracing these six big ideas as our own, Atlanta can make substantial progress toward the vision of a world-class city with a great park system.

⁶ Based on data from ULI and The Trust for Public Land *Inside City Parks*

⁷ Ibid.

BIG IDEA #1: CREATE THE ATLANTA PARK DISTRICT

We propose that the city create the Atlanta Park District, an independent agency, to run the city's park system. This is our biggest idea and our number one priority.

This recommendation is embedded in two fundamental observations. First, the cornerstone of any great park system is its operational competence. As we spoke to parks groups throughout the country about best practices, we came to understand that a park system is only as good as its ability to efficiently operate and maintain parks. Second, Atlanta's present Department of Parks simply cannot perform this basic operational responsibility.

Based on dozens of interviews, several months of observation and our own collective experience in working with parks in Atlanta (over 100 years of experience among the Task Force members), we firmly believe that Atlanta's parks system is in crisis and that the only way to fix it is to create an entirely new model of governance. The present structure does not work, and minor changes are not enough. A radical new approach is required.

We propose to pattern the Atlanta Park District after the nation's best run parks department – the Chicago Park District. The Chicago Park District is an independent agency created by state law. The Mayor of Chicago appoints a seven (7) member Board of Directors, which has full responsibility for the system, including operations, maintenance, personnel, budget, programs and capital improvements. The District has taxing and bonding authority as well. Notably, several other cities use the same model of governance quite effectively, including Minneapolis, Kansas City and the Fairmont Park District in Philadelphia.

These cities have used the independent agency model to restructure operations; to attract high quality leadership; to cure mismanagement problems; to outsource non-core functions; to partner effectively with private outside groups; to condemn property for joint parks and economic development purposes; and to refocus their missions to the most important park and recreation activities.

An important side benefit of this form of parks governance is that it has proven to be an effective way to involve the many independent private groups interested in improving parks. Chicago's Park District, for example, works with advisory councils and citizens to set the budget and provide the comprehensive plan for each fiscal year. Chicago has even moved to a park-specific budgeting process so that each neighborhood knows exactly what is being invested in its community. Moreover, parks advocates can directly participate in the process through representation on the Board of Directors.

The first step in forming the Atlanta Park District is to draft enabling legislation and include the initiative as part of the city's legislative agenda for the 2003 General Assembly. Assuming passage of the legislation next year, the District would not become law until July, 2003. However, the city could still make substantial progress in the meantime by (1) immediately establishing a *Parks Commission* comprised of representatives from the parks and business communities to help lobby for the new agency and to assist in the transition from the present Department of Parks to the new Atlanta Park District and (2) immediately commissioning an outside, independent audit of the current Parks Department (under the guidance of the Parks Commission). In this manner the city will be ready to move forward immediately upon passage of the enabling legislation.

There are many details that the interim Parks Commission will need to address in order to draft effective legislation and manage the transition process. One important issue, of course, is funding. Most likely, the best method for ensuring appropriate and dependable funding for the new Atlanta Park District is to formally allocate a percentage of property taxes to the independent agency. In this report we intentionally do not address all the particulars – such as funding – of the independent agency concept. We see the Parks Commission as the appropriate entity to address those issues.

Refer to these web sites for more information:

<http://www.phila.gov/summary/fairmount/>

<http://www.chicagoparkdistrict.com>

<http://www.atlanta-midtown.com/neighborhoods/parks/>

<http://www.ci.atlanta.ga.us/citydir/rec.htm>

Action Points and Implementation Strategy for creating the Atlanta Park District

1. Form a Parks Commission (a) to advise the city on drafting the enabling legislation (including the appropriate structure of the proposed Atlanta Park District and the appropriate funding mechanism for the District) and (b) to oversee the outside audit of the current Parks Department.
2. Draft enabling legislation creating the Atlanta Park District as the independent governing body for parks and recreation.
3. Include the legislation as the city's highest priority in its 2003 General Assembly legislative agenda.
4. Initiate a thorough audit of the current Parks Department by January 1, 2003 to be completed by March 31, 2003.
5. The City should request non-profit parks organizations to fund the audit.
6. At a minimum, the audit should:
 - Review purchasing procedures, existing contracts, operating and management policies and procedures.
 - Perform a complete equipment inventory to include quantity and condition.
 - Review all expenditures related to the Greenhouse, the Tree Farm, and use of the Motor Transport Division, equipment procurement, allocation and repairs.
 - Establish a budget process that is more accurate and revealing in terms of the actual revenues, costs and capital appropriation.
 - Review salary grades and ranges.
 - Publish a schedule of routine staff meetings held by the department and the bureaus and to encourage attendance by the Parks Commission appointees.

- Review the management structure of the Department to maximize the number of employees actually maintaining and operating parks and recreational facilities.
 - Review all present revenue sources for the Department, including rentals, special event fees, golf course rental, Park Improvement Fund, Park Impact Fees, and other fees. Evaluate ways to maximize those revenues. Compare the results with other successful municipal park agencies.
 - Use web-based technology for information and postings.
7. We recommend that the Atlanta Park District be structured in a way to maximize the contribution and involvement of representatives from businesses, foundations, park advocacy organizations, and neighborhoods.
 8. The Atlanta Park District should become accredited by the National Recreation and Parks Association (NRPA).

The best way to build acceptance and develop the reputation for transparency is to seek accreditation from the national organization for recreation and parks departments throughout the country. The perceived unwillingness of the current Department of Parks to open its operations to scrutiny exacerbates concerns from the public as to the structure and finances. The Department of Parks appears insulated from the public and the City overall, limiting the ability of outside interests to monitor its actions and outcomes. We are encouraged by the public transparency of decision making now seen in Mayor Franklin's office. We would like transparency to extend to all aspects of the recreation and parks operations and within the new Atlanta Park District.

- Develop a plan to begin a two to three year accreditation process as recommended by the National Recreation and Parks Association in its "Self-Assessment Manual for Quality Operation of Park and Recreation Agencies."
- Implement management policies and procedures as recommended and published by the National Recreation and Parks Association.

BIG IDEA #2: DOUBLE THE ACREAGE OF PARKS AND GREENSPACE IN THE CITY BY 2012

Atlanta is far behind comparable cities in the amount and accessibility of parkland and greenspace provided to its residents. When compared to cities of similar size and density, Atlanta ranks among the lowest in acres per 1,000 residents (7.5 acres versus an average of 19.6). We rank next to last when measuring the area of city land devoted to parks (3.7% of total city size versus an average of 7.9%).

Moreover, opportunities for new parks and greenspace are quickly dwindling. We have already lost prime open space to rapidly spreading development. Given the growth projections for the City, it is not an overstatement to say that we have one last chance—perhaps a 10-year window—to preserve the quality open spaces necessary for a great park system.

To ensure that our children and grandchildren grow up in a city with plentiful parks, we must act quickly and we must act boldly. We recommend that Atlanta immediately begin development of a master plan to double the amount of its parks and green space acreage by 2012.

In doubling the amount of park land, the City must take care to create spaces matched with current and anticipated needs. For example, although soccer is currently the fastest growing participation sport in America, the City has only a handful of soccer fields. To meet National Recreation and Parks Association standards, the city would have to add 33 soccer fields. Moreover, cutting edge parks are now providing non-traditional amenities such as skate parks. As the City acquires new parks under the massive acquisition program, we recommend that the need for additional soccer fields and a new skate park be made a priority.

Action Points and Implementation Strategy

1. The Parks Commission should lay the groundwork for developing a master plan to purchase approximately 3,122 acres of parks and green space over the next 10 years. We suggest that the City and Parks Commission form a partnership with the Trust for Public Land (TPL) to begin development of the master plan immediately.
2. The newly created Atlanta Park District should make the finalization of this master plan its first priority when that entity is formed in July, 2003.
3. The City should use the 1993 *Parks, Open Space and Greenways Plan* and work already begun by the Trust for Public Land and PARC 9-1-1 as a starting point for land acquisition.
4. The Atlanta Park District (or the city) should use its condemnation power as needed (as the State used to acquire the land for Centennial Olympic Park) to ensure appropriate properties are acquired.
5. Working with private sector partners, the Parks Commission should create an up-to-date profile (for later use by the Atlanta Park District) that demonstrates Atlanta's greenspace and parks needs in a clear and concise manner.
6. The Parks Commission should map existing city parks, youth facilities and schools to show the areas of need. TPL and the Parks Commission should then overlay tax

- delinquent properties, vacant parcels, and Board of Education surplus to determine possible acquisition sites.
7. The Atlanta Park District should use rivers, streams, lakes and creeks to create greenway networks linking neighborhoods to libraries, community centers, schools, parks and other community resources.
 8. The Atlanta Park District should create a “land acquisition team” to streamline acquisition, possibly using the MAOGA model.
 9. Land owned by the City (such as the 300+ acre former prison farm site) and other larger parcels that can be identified should be inventoried and prioritized for parks and greenspace opportunities. The Trust for Public Land has recently looked at developing a partnership with the City of Atlanta and DeKalb County to develop a park on this site. More discussion is needed to make this vision a reality.
 10. In developing a new park, the Atlanta Park District should conduct a needs assessment to determine exactly what should be included in the park to respond to the facility and open space needs of the community.

BIG IDEA #3: RAISE \$400 MILLION OVER 10 YEARS TO SUPPORT PARKS AND GREENSPACE ACQUISITION AND DEVELOPMENT⁸

Doubling Atlanta's parks and greenspace will not be easy, especially given today's economic climate and the financial condition of the city. Indeed, a campaign of this magnitude has likely never been attempted anywhere in the country. However, we believe this goal can be accomplished through a bond referendum and through charitable contributions.

Specifically, we recommend that the City pursue a \$200 million bond referendum and initiate a campaign to raise another \$200 million from the philanthropic and business communities, as well as the State and Federal governments. (These figures assume that the city can acquire 3,122 acres at approximately \$100,000 per acre, with the remaining funds used for improvements to the new parks, as well as existing parks.) Recognizing the present economic realities, it would make the most sense to pursue this initiative in early 2004.

While the campaign will require unprecedented city, state, federal, public, philanthropic and corporate support, there is strong evidence that voters are quite willing to pay for the many benefits that come with more and better parks. Notably, both Gwinnett County (a \$350M sales tax referendum) and DeKalb County (a \$125M property tax referendum) have recently passed large bond referendums.

We believe the key to this effort is to give Atlanta's voters and funders a reason to have confidence in the city's ability to successfully execute such an unprecedented effort. We see three things that can provide that level of confidence: (1) formation of the Atlanta Park District to restructure, reform and streamline the operations of the park system; (2) providing a specific list of projects for which the funds will be spent; and (3) prompt construction of projects under the existing Quality of Life Bonds to demonstrate the city's ability to utilize bond money efficiently and effectively.

A public awareness campaign is also critical to the success of this initiative. People must understand that because of Atlanta's tremendous growth, we likely have one last opportunity – a 10 year window – to set aside land for parks. We are faced today with a decision that will define Atlanta for our children and grandchildren. If we do not take advantage of this opportunity now, it will be too expensive to buy the needed land in the future.

Action Points and Implementation Strategy

1. Charge the new Atlanta Park District with developing a plan to initiate a \$200M bond referendum in 2004.
2. Challenge our corporate and philanthropic community to match the \$200M for a total of \$400M.
3. Develop a team that is knowledgeable in the area of fundraising in Atlanta that can execute this kind of campaign.

⁸ Assuming the City would acquire 3,122 acres at approximately \$100,000 per acre and use the remaining funds for improvements to existing and new parks.

4. Identify state and federal funding for park acquisition. Once identified, the Atlanta Park District will draft proposals and contact the necessary legislators for introduction of bills and support of proposals.
5. Designate an advocacy group, such as PARC 9-1-1, to spearhead a public education effort on the need and urgency for the acquisition program.
6. Develop a matching grants program, similar to the successful program in Seattle, which encourages local partnership and community involvement in park improvements.
7. Prioritize all existing City funds directed to parks and greenspace, including impact fees, the Consent Decree greenway acquisition program, the Governor's Greenspace Initiative, and the Quality of Life Bonds, according to the acquisition plan.
8. Charge reasonable and proper park usage fees and festival permit fees to be used for maintenance and repair (thus freeing City funds for land acquisition).

BIG IDEA #4: PARTNER WITH ORGANIZATIONS TO CREATE A WORLD CLASS PARK SYSTEM

Partnerships, either public or private, create valuable funding, programming, and maintenance resources for park systems. Groups such as the Trust for Public Land, Piedmont Park Conservancy, the Blank Foundation and the Marcus Foundation are potential partners to begin the cultivation of public/private ventures in Atlanta.

As we develop new parks, the care and maintenance of green space must be a priority for the city and our partners. Problems such as graffiti and broken equipment must be quickly addressed and trash quickly removed to foster pride in the world class park system we want to create.

Action Points and Implementation Strategy

1. Create a structure and mechanism, perhaps managed by Park Pride, which will support public/private partnerships. Use strong communications to engage partners as active participants in projects.
2. Create a partnership with major foundations and corporations to provide \$200M in matching funds for land acquisition over 10 years. Start preliminary discussions with partners twelve months before a vote on the bond measure.
3. Designate an advocacy group, such as PARC 9-1-1 that will focus on engaging the community and coordinating volunteer efforts. Create an action plan for business partners to offer employees opportunities to participate in volunteer programs and civic activities.
4. Designate a lobbying group focused on education and communication with local government representatives and the community at large.
7. Create an environment where there is equal access to information by all partners, including ongoing communication about projects and meetings.
8. Assign a staff person in a position of responsibility within the Atlanta Park District to be responsible for partnership development.
9. Clarify the role of the Atlanta-Fulton County Recreation Authority.
10. Seek partnerships with outside groups such as the Board of Education, YMCA, the Boys and Girls Club, ALTA, Emory University, Georgia Tech, Morehouse College and Georgia State to increase recreational sites and improve programming at existing recreation facilities.
11. Work with the Trust for Public Land's (TPL) development team to design creative strategies and approaches for land acquisition and park development.
12. Challenge local foundations to match public funds with private dollars.
13. Charge proper and reasonable park user fees that can be used to re-seed grass, plant trees, and clean the park after events.

14. Develop a matching grants program that encourages local partnership and community involvement in park improvements.
15. Partner with groups and businesses to maintain the parks facilities to the highest standards.
16. Partner with neighborhood organizations to run and organize events at recreation facilities.

Partnering Organizations:

- Trees Atlanta
- Ardmore Park/Tanyard Creek Urban forest
- Trust for Public Land
- Grant Park Conservancy
- Perkinson Park Restoration Committee
- Central Atlanta Neighbors
- Freedom Park Conservancy
- Inman Park Neighborhood Association
- Piedmont Park Conservancy
- Cherokee Garden Club
- Peachtree Garden Club
- PATH Foundation
- Atlanta Youth Soccer
- Wildwood Urban Forest Group
- Olmstead Linear Park Alliance
- Friends of Chastain Park
- West End Changers
- Chastain Park Civic
- Buckhead Coalition
- Brookwood Hills Community Association
- Kirkwood Neighbors Organization
- Morningside Lenox Park Association
- Peachtree Hills Civic Association
- Martin Woods Coalition
- Underwood Hills
- North Buckhead Civic Association
- Adair Park Today
- Cascade Youth Organization
- Lake Claire Neighborhood Association
- Hands on Atlanta
- Anderson Park Neighborhood Association
- North Atlanta Swim Association
- Garden Hills Neighborhood Association
- Buckhead Baseball
- Greystone Garden Club
- Iverson Park Neighbors
- Centennial Olympic Park
- Central Atlanta Progress
- Midtown Alliance
- Park Pride
- The Arthur Blank Foundation
- The Marcus Foundation
- The Woodruff Foundation
- Garden Clubs

- Business/Corporate Community

Non Profit Sector

- Olmstead Linear Park Alliance
- Candler Park Neighborhood Association
- Wildwood Urban Forest Group
- Iverson Park Neighborhood Association
- Orme Park Neighborhood Association

BIG IDEA #5: BUILD A GREAT PARK WITH AN OUTDOOR EVENTS VENUE

Great cities have at least one major park to serve as THE focal point for cultural and recreational events. These “centerpiece parks” can handle large concerts and festivals easily. They have signature qualities – such as the lakefront of Chicago’s Grant Park or the many museums along the Mall in Washington, D.C. While Centennial Park and Piedmont Park are wonderful in their own right, they are quite small by most major city standards, and they cannot handle large scale events without undue wear and tear.

We believe Atlanta needs a single, large park – over 500 acres – that can house a variety of activities, both active and passive, and that includes an outdoor events venue.

Because Atlanta has no appropriate outdoor special events venue, our larger city parks have been required to bear the burden of major art and music festivals, races and runs, and other special events. While these special events provide numerous benefits, including a coming together of our citizens, support for arts and culture, entertainment, and increased economic activity in the city, they also place a strain on our parks. Hundreds of thousands of people, large stages, heavy equipment, vehicles, vendors and exhibits overwhelm our already fragile and poorly maintained greenspaces during events. Exacerbating the situation is the City’s present permit fee structure – which bears no rational relationship to the actual costs of special events and the damage they cause to parks. For example in 2002, the Midtown Music Festival paid \$6,000 for their permit to the City, while the City incurred extra costs for security and clean up. The City must increase its permit fees to accurately reflect the costs of such events.

Further, today’s parks need to accommodate a wide range of activities, from passive recreation opportunities for aging baby boomers to new youth activities for the children and grandchildren of those same baby boomers. A great new park for Atlanta should reflect the many national trends in parks planning. Those national trends include:

- Basketball and softball continue to enjoy strong participation rates, while participation in football and tennis are declining in some areas of the country. Soccer, on the other hand, is soaring in popularity, particularly among younger and immigrant populations. Girls’ fast-pitch softball is also experiencing explosive growth.
- Popular themed playgrounds go beyond the normal powder-coated swings and jungle gyms found in older parks to more interactive playgrounds appropriate for various age ranges.
- Skate parks, roller hockey rinks, and other active amenities not imagined 20 years ago are becoming standard in cities of all sizes. Parks systems need to be flexible to accommodate new, currently unimagined activities that will become popular in years to come.
- The popularity of static lap pools is fading in favor of more dynamic family aquatic centers, which can include traditional lap pools, but also feature water play structures, fountains, spraygrounds, zero-depth entry, and other family-friendly amenities.
- Traditional recreation centers geared toward youth activities are being replaced by larger, more diverse centers that provide facilities and activities for all ages, improving interaction and communication among generations. Cardio and strength training facilities, commonly found in community recreation centers, are seeing increased use by both younger and older populations.
- Activities to attract teens challenge communities all over the country. Research suggests that teens are less interested in structured recreation activities than in unstructured environments where they can be with friends. Unprogrammed open spaces and recreation centers can attract teens and encourage positive behavior, providing a structured environment with

unstructured activities. In addition, facilities, which provide for supervised unstructured play such as basketball clinics, as well as facilities such as roller hockey rinks and skate parks, provide facilities for desirable recreation activities.

- The most important national trend to note is that parks planning at the master plan level must create a flexible system that responds to the needs of the current population while ensuring that changes can be made to accommodate future as-yet-unknown recreation needs.

Action Points and Implementation Strategy

1. Identify a location for a new signature park of at least 500 acres.
2. Make the acquisition of this property the first priority of the funds from the 2004 bond referendum.
3. Include within the park an outdoor event facility designed to accommodate large outdoor special events with the appropriate technology, equipment, infrastructure, transit and parking.
4. Design the parks to include cutting edge recreational facilities that will appeal to a broad spectrum of people.
5. Reform the City's permit process and fees to reflect the true cost of special events. Return all such fees directly to the host parks for improvements and repair.
6. If events are to continue in city parks, allocate the resources to improve the infrastructure to accommodate events, and to make complete repairs of damage caused by the event.
7. Enforce more stringent special event guidelines and hold event organizers accountable with appropriate consequences for noncompliance.
8. Set the standard by ensuring that the City's own special events put care of the parks first.
9. Close targeted city streets on weekends for street fairs, bicycling, rollerblading, and other supervised activities.
10. Research the feasibility of Gun Club Park as a community amenity. If feasible, develop a plan to revitalize the park in conjunction with the new development that is planned for the area. This may not be the "Great Park" but will assist with the park need.

BIG IDEA #6: MAKE PARKS SAFER

Safety is the most fundamental underpinning of a good park. Any other positive aspect of a park is rendered moot if the property itself is not safe. Visitors to the Atlanta parks system should never even have to question their safety. Unfortunately, security is an issue at most of Atlanta's parks, and crimes such as vandalism, drug dealing, and prostitution are common. Some parks are plagued with more serious and even violent crimes.

Most obviously, safety is a function of regular police patrols, and the Atlanta Police Department must be more involved in patrolling our park system. We suggest that the police increase their role in park security, perhaps through a Park Ranger or equivalent policing program. In some cases, security issues arise not from a lack of police presence, but from an inconsistency in enforcing park rules. By ignoring the need to enforce appropriate rules in parks we have created a sense that people do not care—and this breeds criminal activity. In short, the police department must get serious about enforcing the park rules.

Safety, however, is also a function of appropriate park maintenance. We interviewed many people who are active in their neighborhood parks who pointed to the lack of adequate maintenance of park facilities as the major cause of crime in their parks. Specifically, the obvious signs of physical neglect—accumulating trash, broken playground equipment, graffiti, overgrown grass, and dying shrubs and trees—signal to people that no one cares. And that is the first step on the road to criminal activity.

Action Points and Implementation Strategy

1. Require police to report crimes by park location and maintain a current database of reported crimes.
2. Establish a Park Ranger or equivalent policing program for parks.
3. Make safe parks a priority in policing.
4. Educate the police on parks regulations and establish a “zero tolerance” policy on violations.
5. Post park rules and regulations at each park entrance. Include a phone number for reporting violations.
6. Encourage neighborhoods to report illegal use of parks after dark.
7. Where possible, rehabilitate existing parks to implement “Best Design Practices for Public Safety,” and locate and design all new parks in accordance with those practices.
8. As the City develops new parks, create residential “park drives” around facilities, increasing security through increased visibility, accessibility and neighborhood ownership of the parks.
9. Install security cameras where illicit activities are known to occur.

10. Maintain the parks facilities to the highest standards:

- Establish and implement clear maintenance, inspection, and repair standards for parks, playing fields, playgrounds, and recreation facilities.
- Establish a better system of weekly or monthly inspections of all parks and recreation facilities.
- Provide an effective training and certification program for park workers; ensure that all maintenance staff is certified to perform job duties.
- Strictly adhere to Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC) and American Disabilities Act (ADA) standards in playground maintenance.
- Invest in the level of staffing and equipment necessary to meet a high maintenance standard.
- Develop a priority plan of maintenance support based upon park size, amount of usage, importance to the city, visibility and community support.

APPENDIX A: OVERVIEW OF EXISTING PARKS DEPARTMENT

We have spent several months analyzing the Department of Parks, including sitting in on staff meetings, visiting maintenance sites and meeting with top officials. In addition, all of us on the Task Force have worked closely with the Department for years, many of us on a daily basis. Based on our review process, as well as our collective decades worth of experience in working with the Department of Parks, we believe that the current department must be reorganized from top to bottom.

We use the term “reorganize” in its broadest sense. The department needs new leadership; it needs to be reinvigorated; it needs a sense of mission and purpose; it needs a customer service orientation; it needs more workers and fewer managers; it needs more logical and streamlined structure; it needs new procedures and policies. In short, it needs to be taken apart and put back together.

We understand that some may see this as an overstatement. We do not think it is. Following is an account of some of our experiences with the Department that lead us to this conclusion. We have spent a good deal of time editing this section so that it would not overwhelm the entire report.

During the course of the study, the Task Force had two meetings with the Commissioner of Parks, Recreation, and Cultural Affairs. We also held discussions with the Director of the Parks Bureau and the Deputy Director of the Parks Bureau regarding budget and operations, and we attended one Parks Bureau staff meeting. In addition, we made four site visits—one to the greenhouse and tree farm operation, followed by visits to two different maintenance facilities (see photographs on page 18). The Appendix contains an organization chart that shows the make-up of the department before and after the Reduction in Force. Overall, observations on the management operations are as follows:

- Staff discussions about spotty attendance at staff meetings indicate a poor working relationship between the Commissioner and the Bureau of Parks.
- There is a need to reduce the middle management and increase field staff. The 2002 Reduction in Force (RIF) cut mostly into the lowest levels of the department—the maintenance workers. The cuts primarily affect the field operations level, which provides direct services to the public. We believe that certain middle managers are not performing their jobs and the Commissioner appears unable or unwilling to fire, discipline or motivate the non-performing individuals.
- The management systems in place, at least in the Bureau of Parks, appear to be inadequate, inappropriate, and antiquated.
- There is a lack of information in the department. For instance, the memorandum given to us by the Commissioner regarding the greenhouse and other data illustrated the costs without telling us how much plant material was produced. They have employees in the facility seven days a week maintaining and watering the plant material. Yet, production does not even approach facility capacity.

- The overall attitude of the employees within the department suffers because of inadequate personnel, inadequate equipment, poor leadership and an inability to obtain desperately needed resources. At one point during this year, the department could not purchase or repair any of the small gasoline-powered engines.
- The organization of the entire department needs to be rethought. The department has a large organization entitled Management Services, which appears to have significant overlapping responsibilities among the several bureaus within the department. For instance, the Bureau of Parks has a Human Resource Specialist with two staff people. Yet, the Management Services office has a Human Resource Manager with four staff people, all of similar capabilities. The Management Services Office has a Manager of Parks Equipment Coordinator, who appears inappropriately placed in the organization. There appears to be a significant amount of overlap and poor organization primarily due to a disconnect between the Bureau of Parks and the Commissioner's Office.
- The greenhouse operation appears to be extremely costly. The operation does not have adequate equipment to distribute the plants or properly maintain flowerbeds. In-house operating and maintenance costs exceed the costs of outsourcing this work to a professional landscape maintenance organization. We realize there are significant issues associated with closing down the greenhouse, or privatizing the operations, but inadequate equipment (one pick-up truck working for all four gardening crews) and financial conditions undermine the efficiency of this operation. It is hoped that an alternative solution can be developed. The total cost to operate the greenhouse during 2001 was \$398,000. Based on information received from an industry professional at Emory, a private company could plant and maintain the 49,459 square feet of flowerbeds at an annual cost of \$215,150. Furthermore, the City's tree farm is terribly overgrown and limited in its usefulness.
- Our analysis reveals significant problems, both in communications and working relations, between the Bureau of Parks and the Bureau of Park Design. At a recent staff meeting, it was indicated that the Parks Design Bureau inappropriately relocated trees on City parkland in order to install the foundation for a new building for a private school. This was apparently done without proper communication within the Department, an appropriate legal review, or authorization. The Department of Parks was then responsible for reviewing the installation of the relocated trees and ensuring proper maintenance by the contractor, apparently without a written contract between the City, the school, or its contractor.
- Also with the Bureau of Park Design, discussions indicate significant problems with purchasing and contracting procedures. The Perkerson Park community has complained on numerous occasions about the quality and overall administration of work that was contracted by the City. The Perkerson Park experience reveals a lack of clear responsibility and/or authority on contract work. On requesting detailed cost data on the contracts the Perkerson Park organization was at first refused the information but then found out the City incurred inordinate costs for trees of poor quality that quickly died.
- Poor equipment continues to be a major detriment to providing quality of parks and recreation services. Inadequate, old, insufficient, and poorly maintained equipment hamper Department of Parks operations. Equipment is also abused, awaiting repair by the Bureau of Motor Transportation, or badly allocated among facilities. As of June 10, 2002, 93 pieces of equipment were "shopped" and therefore out of service. Of this total, 24 were trucks, cars or major equipment. The remaining equipment included riding or push grass mowers and other

small gasoline powered equipment. The Motor Transport Department provides poor service at outrageous cost. We understand the Parks Department is charged \$100 per oil change, while market price is under \$50. Further, Motor Transport in the first quarter of 2002 decided to stop servicing the small engines of the Department of Parks without sufficient notice, causing significant problems.

APPENDIX B: IMAGES FROM SITE VISIT JUNE 2002



Maintenance facilities and unused trucks



Unused equipment due to maintenance concerns or lack of trained equipment operators



Large number of unused tires and broken equipment in the storage and maintenance areas





Debris and abandoned
playground equipment



Excess capacity of
greenhouse



Excess capacity in
greenhouse



Broken sprinkler system and
unused space

APPENDIX C: BUDGET REVIEW

The initial budget that we received from the Commissioner's office, which is apparently the official City of Atlanta Finance Department's publication, turned out to be wrong and contained misinformation. The Commissioner instructed us to ignore this document. All of the five sets of budget and cost information given to us were different and confusing. The following inventory of maintainable assets is based on the best data available.

City of Atlanta Maintainable Park Assets

Park Asset	Totals
Parks	238 (2,762 acres) ⁹
Flower Beds	49,459 sq.ft.
Mowed Acres	508
Playgrounds	111
Ball Fields	85
Soccer Fields	9
Tennis Courts	182
Basketball Courts	74
Volleyball Courts	5
Swimming Pools	21

Several discrepancies and duplications appear in the provided information. For instance, Park Pride through their adopt-a-park and other programs maintain 47 of these parks and care for 30.2 acres and 1,633 square feet of flower beds, all at no cost to the city but the City incorrectly reports that it maintains these areas.

The following reflects our best understanding of the budget and cost situation.

Total Budget for the Parks, Recreation and Cultural Affairs Department

	2002 Revised Budget*	2001 Actual
Personnel	\$15,201,067	\$17,749,089
Other Operating Expenses	\$5,341,937	\$6,246,932
Internal Services ¹⁰	\$1,756,594	\$1,763,509
Capital	\$398,950	\$607,063
Totals	\$22,698,548	\$26,366,595

*Civic Center operations have been deleted from the 2002 budget

Below is the breakdown of the above for each Department of Parks unit:

⁹ Department of Parks acres that are actually maintained

¹⁰ Expenses which include motor equipment, fuel, repairs, and rentals

Total for the Bureau of Parks

	2002 Revised Budget	2001 Actual
Personnel	\$5,079,319	\$7,088,845
Other Operating Expenses	\$1,967,273	\$1,711,781
Internal Services	\$1,534,638	\$1,557,895
Capital	\$387,676	\$578,442
Totals	\$8,968,906	\$10,938,963

Total for the Bureau of Recreation

	2002 Revised Budget	2001 Actual
Personnel	\$8,597,686	\$8,224,217
Other Operating Expenses	\$2,286,082	\$2,228,070
Internal Services	\$203,920	\$183,164
Capital	\$11,274	\$9,002
Totals	\$11,098,962	\$10,646,453

Total for the Bureau of Cultural Affairs

	2002 Revised Budget*	2001 Actual
Personnel	\$807,468	\$1,630,405
Other Operating Expenses	\$1,036,232	\$2,257,775
Internal Services	\$7,191	\$10,783
Capital	\$0	\$16,032
Totals	\$1,850,891	\$3,914,995

*Civic Center Operations removed from Cultural Affairs responsibilities for 2002

Total for the Administration

	2002 Revised Budget	2001 Actual
Personnel	\$716,594	\$805,621
Other Operating Expenses	\$52,350	\$49,306
Internal Services	\$10,845	\$11,667
Capital	0	0
Totals	\$779,789	\$870,183

Park Improvement Fund Budget*

	2002 Revised Budget	2001 Actual
Personnel	\$989,993	\$1,058,813
Other Operating Expenses	\$695,323	\$964,409
Internal Services	\$428,696	\$402,246
Inter Govt/Inter Fund	\$1,570,000	\$5,759,562
Capital Expenses	\$2,409,988	\$7,274,487
Total	\$6,094,000	\$15,463,760

* This appears to be an additional budget.

Our conclusion is the total budget was reduced by 14 percent from 2001 to 2002. The decreases include: 18 percent decrease in the Bureau of Parks, 4 percent in the Bureau of Recreation, 53 percent in the Bureau of Cultural Affairs and 10 percent in Administration.

The public considers the department in deplorable shape yet the department budget is decreasing. Consequently we need realistic budgets to protect the priorities of the department:

- maintenance
- safety
- land acquisition

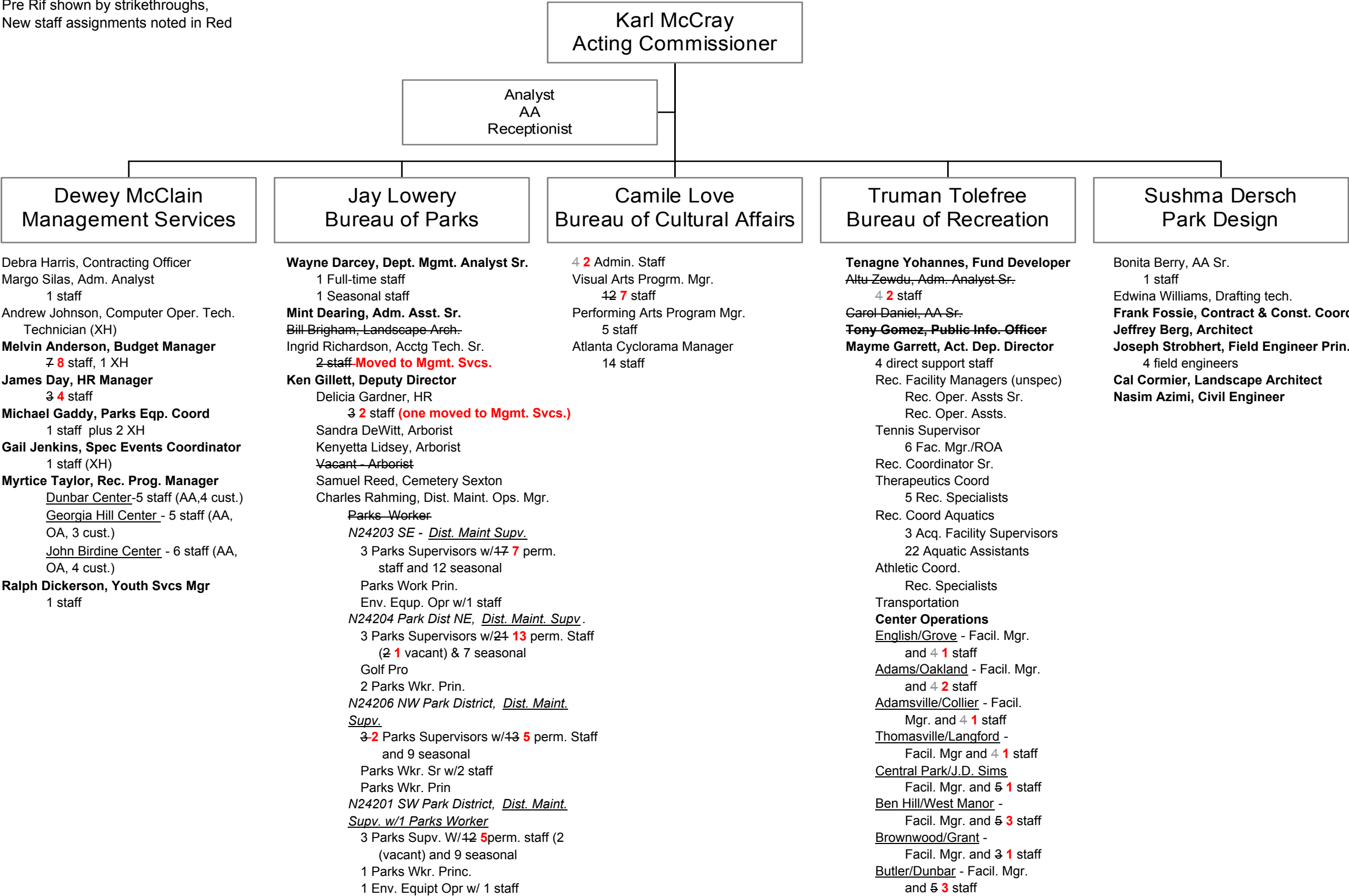
It is apparent to us that the rebudgeting did not further these priorities. In summary, we can only conclude that the department needs an immediate audit of its budget and personnel. Department and personnel expenditures must be redirected to support the priorities listed throughout this report.

APPENDIX D – Work Chart

	Before RIF	After RIF
Middle Management	96	92
Service/Staff Employees (full-time)	335	280
Service/Staff Employees (seasonal)	73	73

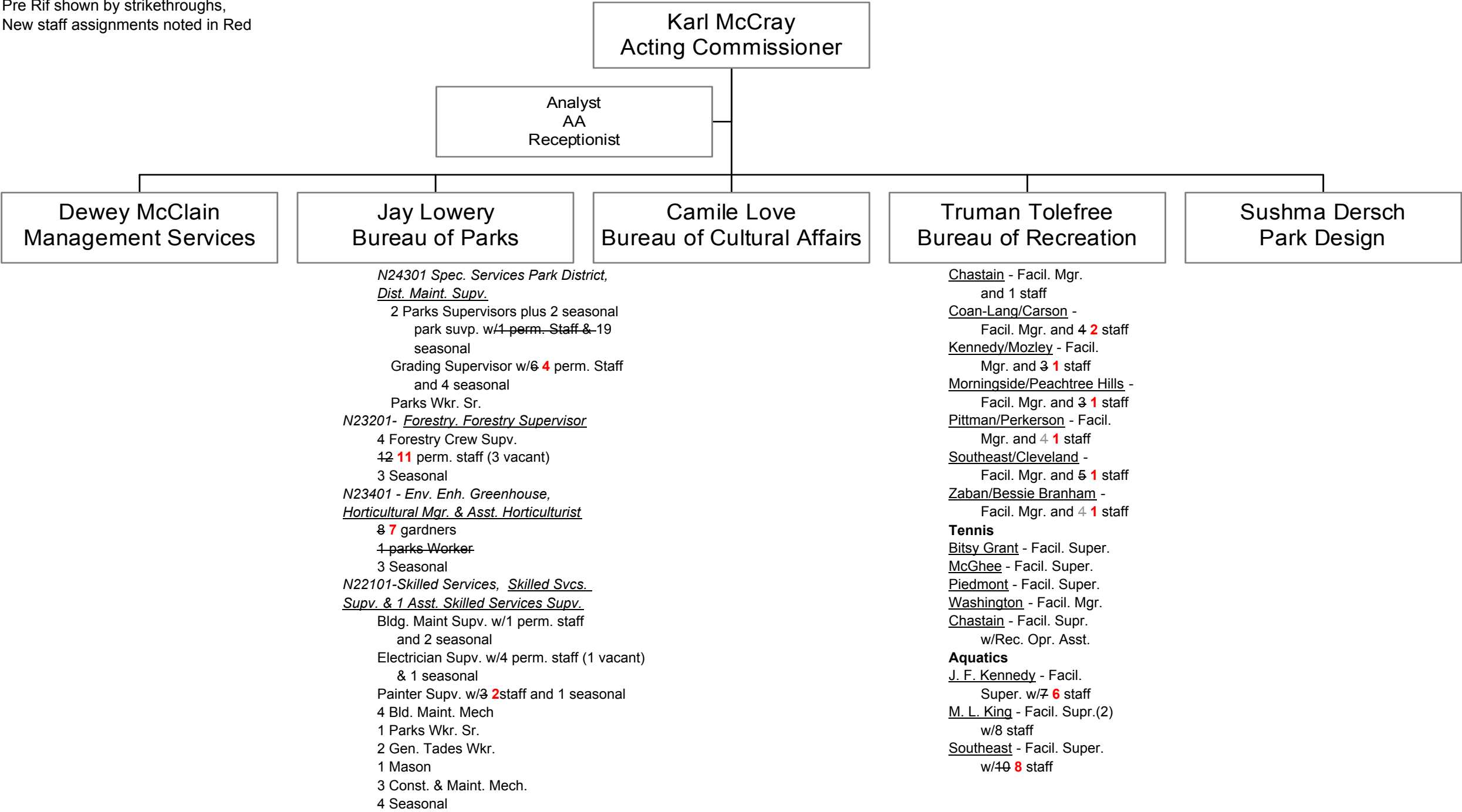
CITY OF ATLANTA
DEPARTMENT OF PARKS

Post-Rif
Pre Rif shown by strikethroughs,
New staff assignments noted in Red



CITY OF ATLANTA
DEPARTMENT OF PARKS

Post-Rif
Pre Rif shown by strikethroughs,
New staff assignments noted in Red



Note: Bold indicates individual reports directly to Department Manager

APPENDIX E– RECREATION FACILITIES ANALYSIS

	Total in City of Atlanta	Facility per 2000 Population	NRPA Standards	Number needed to meet NRPA standards
Ballfields	85	4,894	5,000 people/field	0
Tennis courts	182	2,286	2,000 people/court	26
Basketball	74	5,622	5,000 people/court	9
Swimming pools	21	19,810	20,000 people/pool	0
Soccer fields	9	46,222	10,000 people/field	33
Playgrounds	111	3,748	5,000 people/playground	0

This analysis does not take into account whether the existing facilities and fields are appropriately located, used and/or maintained.